DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 173 308 SP 014 165

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TITLE The Educator's Role: Piaget's View.
PUB DATE 79
NOTE 16p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Development; Child Psychology; *Learning Processes; *Motivation Techniques; Self Actualization; Student Role; *Student Teacher Relationship; Teacher Responsibility; *Teacher Role; Teaching Techniques
IDENTIFIERS *Piaget (Jean)

ABSTRACT

The advice of Jean Piaget on the role of the educator as promoter of human development in students is reviewed. Included in this study are his observations and admonitions about characteristic duties and functions of a teacher as seen from the perspective of his research findings about the development of human learning and the learner. (JD)

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ED173308

THE EDUCATOR'S ROLE: PIAGET'S VIEW

Journal manuscript

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SP 014 165

ABSTRACT

Piaget's advice about the role of the educator as promoter of human development. Included are his observations and admonitions about the importance, the training requirements, the characteristic duties and specific functions, and the exciting challenges of the educator's role, as suggested by his research findings about the development of human learning and the learner.

THE EDUCATOR'S ROLE: PIAGET'S VIEW

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Jean Piaget knows probably more than anyone else about what, when, and how children learn. When, after a half-century of meticulous research of cognitive development, he gives us his view of the educator's role in fostering this development, he deserves our attention.

While insisting (against authoritarian tyranny) that the educator must "be a collaborator and not a master,"[1] he also contends (against romantic laissez-faire anarchy) that we must not "eliminate the social action of the teacher." We ought rather to seek

> to achieve a reconciliation between respect for the adult and cooperation among the children, and as far as possible, reduce the constraint exercised by the former in order to transform it into a higher form of cooperation.[2]

Piaget has always defended the exceptional importance of education in the development of the young.[3] For him, the child's growth is neither the mere unfolding of pre-programmed innate capabilities, nor cumulative training by environmental conditioning. Against both latter-day Rousseaus and contemporary behaviorists he views the growth process as a dynamic interaction of personal restructurings and an ever-

challenging environment. In this process the educator has a crucial role: steward and enricher of the physical and social environment, sympathetic collaborator in learning, skilled provider of growth-promoting challenges, etc.[4] This role is made more awesome by Piaget's discovery that neither genes nor environmental contingencies determine what the child will become; the dynamic interaction between the striving child and his experienced world create the mature person. The educator is both a part of and a co-creator of the child's world.

The educator, Piaget argues, can and must trust the thrust which propels the growing learner and is prime motivator of his development. This trust will help the educator both to understand the child's behavior and to provide adequate challenges for his further growth.[5]

"The relationships which the child has with the people on whom he depends will therefore, be, strictly speaking, formative," says Piaget.[6] The delicate task for the educator is to "not allow children a completely free rein on the one hand, nor channel them too narrowly on the other hand."[7] The educator is responsible for

> two processes that have very different results and become complementary only with much care and tact: the constraint exercised by the adult and the cooperation of the children with each other. The constraint exercised by the adult achieves results that are all the more considerable in that they answer to very profound tendencies in the child's mentality.[8]

While defending the inevitability and necessity of adult constraint, Piaget often expresses deep concern about its exercise. An adult's "instruction or order is only accepted and only engenders a feeling of obligation it is comes from a person who is respected--in other words, one who is the object of both affection and fear at the same time."[9] The educator, then, must deserve the child's affection; she must be lovable, as well as capable. Fear alone is not only not enough; it is damaging because it prevents growth. The growing child evolves from an extreme egocentrism to a unilateral respect for external authority. To keep him there is to arrest development. He must be helped toward "the reflection and critical discussion that help to constitute reason and that can only be developed by cooperation and genuine intellectual exchange."[10] The learner must evolve from obedience to personal responsibility, from heteronomy to reciprocal autonomy. A key duty of the educator is to pro-

vide ample opportunity for the needed cooperative intellectual exchange. Sometimes the educator herself may be a suitable partner in such cooperation, but usually (because of the child's attitude toward adults) the child cannot experience such collaboration as a cooperation of equals. The needed cooperation, Piaget asserts, must usually be between peers.[11] The educator must foster peer collaboration. 'Group work' is, for Piaget, an essential condition for cognitive and for moral growth.[12]

Not only isit necessary that the educator provide adequate scope for the young learner to experience and practice collaboration; the collaborative activities must involve real action on the learner's environment. Knowledge, intelligence, and intellectual development proceed from action, and depend essentially on the learning subject's activity.[13] "To know an object is to act upon it and transform it," says Piaget,[14] and long practice in physical action is a necessary condition of intellectual operations.

> There is nothing more difficult for the adult than to know how to appeal to the spontaneous and real activity of the child or adolescent. Only this activity, oriented and constantly stimulated by the teacher, but remaining free in its attempts, its tentative efforts, and even in its errors, cna lead to intellectual independence. The goal

> of intellectual education is not to know how to repeat or retain ready-made truths (a truth that is parroted is only a half-truth). It is in learning to master the truth by oneself at the risk of losing a lot of time and of going through all the roundabout ways that are inherent in real activity.[15]

Activities, furthermore, must be either learner-selected or at least seen by the learner as congruent with her interests and needs. The educator must encourage collaborators to initiate and design their own action-projects and not limit them to predetermined alternatives.[16]

Learner-selected collaborative actions must also be 'experimental.' Piaget urges educators to maintain "a great respect for this natural experimental potential of thechild."[17] They must encourage "experimentation that will help toform a spirit of discovery and active verification,"[18] since only by experimentation will the learner come to understand, for example, "the extreme complexity of even the most apparently simple questions," and develop "that indissociable relation between deduction and experiecing that isthe characteristic of reason."[19] Piaget insists that, as we try to ensure that an adequate attention to 'general culture' is included in "scientific and technical schooling," so must we keep an "adequate

amount of time in the teaching of the "arts" subjects for the development of the experimental attitude of mind," a necessary condition for the development of a constructive and critical intelligence.[20] To foster the development of this attitude, the educator must encourage experimentation by all learners, but especially by those between eleven and fifteen years of age, a time when spontaneous experimentation naturally emerges.[21] The educator who is to encourage the experimental attitude in others must experience the process of experimentation herself, not only during the period of professional preparation,[22] but also throughout her whole professional career. The educator must do "experimental pedagogy".[23] Having first-hand experience of what she must foster in others is but the first of many reasons for insisting that the educator be an experimenter. She also needs to experiment to help her understand the developing learner. Piaget argues that

> one cannot truly learn child psychology except by collaborating in new research projects and taking part in experiments, and it is useless to limit courses to exercises or practical work directed toward already known results. ....It is even truer in the case of psychology than in other fields that the only way to understand the facts involved and their interpretation is to undertake some research project of one's own.[24]

Learning about the findings of child psychology is not the same as acquiring an understanding of the growing child; the latter requires personal experimentation. Still another argument for Educators' need to experiment is the fact that those who have succeeded in attaining the desired understanding of child development must then decide how this understanding should influence their professional actions. Piaget insists that we cannot deduce from the research findings of child psychology what curriculum or methods will foster learning.[25] Educators who have an understanding of human development must experiment in their own concrete situations, to develop suitable materials and methods that truly foster development in their students. They must do 'experimental pedagogy.'

> Child psychology can provide us with an ever increasing fund of facts and knowledge concerning the mechanisms of development, but those facts and that knowledge will never reach the schools if the teachers have not absorbed them sufficiently to translate them into original applications.[26]

Another crucial responsibility of the educator (because it is a necessary condition for both cognitive and moral development) is theprovision of adequate opportunityfor the learners to practice and experience self-government, The learners must have

The learners must have responsible independent roles in the collaborative selection, design, execution, and evaluation of both the norms and activities which constitute their intellectual and their social experience. The educator must encourage and assist their stumbling efforts to analyze situations, choose wise courses of action, carry out complex projects, and evaluate their own successes and failures. The educator's real ability to "trust the thrust" of the growing learners, and his sensitive understanding of the conditions and process-needs of human development will contribute substantially to his effectiveness in this mandatory role of promoting the emergence and evolution of "reciprocal autonomy" (Piaget's definition of personality).[27]

Educators are often quick to request that someone show them how to meet the challenges which such a role description presents. Piaget would prefer that educators have the self-confidence, and the understanding of human development and of individual learners to be able to devise their own methods and materials. Most of what he has reported concerning cognitive development has implicit or explicit normative implications for curriculum organization, classroom management, teaching methods, disciplinary

structures and procedures, provision of learning resources, behavioral objectives, evaluation techniques, etc. Maximum scope for self-directed group experimentation, for example, will simultaneously promote moral development, encourage intellectual collaboration, teach discipline, and even assist in 'civic education.'[28] Piaget has long urged that 'active' teaching methods which maximize such self-initiated collaborative experimental projects are most congruent with our present understanding of the requirements of healthy human development.[29]

Educators seeking helpful concrete hints about transforming more traditional schooling into learning opportunities such as Piaget advocates will find considerable assistance in some recent publications. In David and Roger Johnson's remarkable book, Learning Together and Alone: Cooperation, Competition, and Individualization (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975), for example, they will find the extensive research support and the rationale for such a transformation presented clearly and cogently. In Leland and Mary Howe's book, Personalizing Education: Values Clarification and Beyond (New York: Hart Publishing, 1975) the elementary teacher will find, in the last hundred

pages, a detailed step-by-step plan for transforming a traditional authoritarian classroom into a choice-centered one. Adapting many suggestions there to group rather than individual activity would make the learning situation more congruent with Piaget's suggestions. High school educators will find much help, theoretical and practical, in the recent panel reports on the reform of the American High School. The second Coleman report, for instance (Youth: Transition to Adulthood: Report of the Panel on Youth of the President's Science Advisory Committee (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1974) is full of careful analysis and practical suggestions for developing a more action-centered and developmentally productive secondary education for everyone. The implementation of the suggestions in these and similar books will enable the educator to provide the growing young person with improved opportunities for genuine learning, as Piaget defines it: self-determined, collaborative investigative interaction, by action and experiment, with her experienced physical and social environment.[30]

Such educator efforts to promote intellectual development will promote, simultaneously, the affective, social, and moral development of the learner.

> Full development of the personality in its most intellectual aspects is indissoluble from the whole group of emotional, ethical, or social relationships that make up school life. .... In reality, education constitutes an indissoluble whole, and it is not possible to create independent personalities in the ethical area if the individual is also subjected to intellectual constraint to such an extent that he must restrict himself to learning by rote without discovering the truth for himself. If he is intellectually passive, he will not know how to be free ethically. Conversely, if his ethics consist exclusively in submission to adult authority, and if the only social exchanges that make up the life of the class are those that bind each student individually to a master holding all power, he will not know how to be intellectually active.[31]

Recognition of the unity of the many facets of the learner's development gives a more realistic picture of the awesome challenge and responsibility the educator assumes.

> From birth to the end of adolescence, education is one whole, and is one of two fundamental, necessary factors for intellectual and moral formation, so much so that the school carries a great responsibility regarding the final success or failure of the individual in pursuit of his own potential and adaptation to social living. In a word, the internal evolution of a person (according to the aptitudes of each one) only provides merely a certain amount of rough outlines that are capable of being developed, destroyed, or left in an untouched state. But these are only rough outlines, and only social and educational interactions will transform them into efficient behavioral patterns or destroy them totally.[32]

What a challenge! What a responsibility!

NOTES

[1]Jean Piaget, THE MORAL JUDGEMENT OF THE CHILD (New York: Free Press, 1965), pp. 367, 404; see also: Jean Piaget, TO UNDERSTAND IS TO INVENT; THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION (New York: Grossman, 1973), pp. 16, 19, 74.

[2]Jean Piaget, SCIENCE OF EDUCATION AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE CHILD (New York: Orion Press, 1970), pg. 180.

[3]Cf., e.g., TO UNDERSTAND...., pp. 44-56.

[4]Ibid., passim.

[5]THE MORAL JUDGEMENT...., pg. 99.

[6]TO UNDERSTAND...., pp. 113-114.

[7]Jean Piaget (Interview), in Richard I. Evans, JEAN PIAGET: THE MAN AND HIS IDEAS (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1973), pg. 69.

[8]SCIENCE OF EDUCATION...., pg. 178.

[9]TO UNDERSTAND...., pp. 114-115.

[10]SCIENCE OF EDUCATION...., pg. 179.

[11]TO UNDERSTAND...., pp. 6, 11, 93, 107-110.

[12]TO UNDERSTAND...., pp. 107-109, 140; THE MORAL JUDGEMENT...., pg. 405.

[13]SCIENCE OF EDUCATION...., pp. 40-41, 71; TO UNDERSTAND...., pp. 95, 103, 106.

[14]SCIENCE OF EDUCATION...., pp. 28-29.

[15]TO UNDERSTAND...., pp. 105-106.

[16]TO UNDERSTAND...., pp. 92, 98-99; THE MORAL JUDGEMENT...., pp. 366, 405.

[17]Evans, JEAN PIAGET...., pg. 68.

[18]SCIENCE OF EDUCATION...., pg. 12; cf. pp. 50-53.

[19]Ibid., pp. 92, 158.

[20]Ibid., pg. 92.

[21]Ibid., pp. 37-39.

[22]Ibid., pp. 129-130, 132; TO UNDERSTAND...., pp. 21-37.

[23]THE MORAL JUDGEMENT...., pg. 406; SCIENCE OF EDUCATION...., pp. 20-24.

[24]SCIENCE OF EDUCATION...., pp. 125, 129.

[25]THE MORAL JUDGEMENT...., pp. 404, 406.

[26]SCIENCE OF EDUCATION...., pg. 123.

[27]Cf., e.g., TO UNDERSTAND...., pp. 90-91, and passim.

[28]Cf. Ibid., pg. 130.

[29]Cf., e.g., THE MORAL JUDGEMENT...., pg. 404; TO UNDERSTAND ...., pp. 15-16, 20, 106-109, 121; SCIENCE OF EDUCATION...., pp. 69-72, 149.

[30]A composite of elements explained throughout TO UNDERSTAND...., especially pp. 92-109.

[31]TO UNDERSTAND...., pp. 106-107.

[32]Ibid., pg. 55.